

# Languages can be an opportunity – not a barrier

Peter  
Trudgill



email: [newsdesk@archant.co.uk](mailto:newsdesk@archant.co.uk)

It is obvious that languages are barriers to communication. Most of us arriving for the first time in Moldova or Kazakhstan will not be able to communicate at all, unless we can find someone who has learned English.

It is easy to think, then, that the world would be a much better place if we got rid of our different languages. Surely, if we could all understand and communicate with one another in a single common language, then our planet would enjoy a more harmonious and peaceful future?

Well, it is easy to think that – until you remember the American Civil War, where both sides spoke English. Or the appalling genocide in Rwanda, where the Hutus spoke the same Bantu language, Kinyarwanda, as the Tutsis. Or the carnage in Yugoslavia which involved Croats, Serbs and Bosnians, who all spoke Serbo-Croat. All of the groups involved in these orgies of killing were able to understand one another perfectly well, but that did not help.

I prefer to think that barriers to communication are actually a Good Thing. Languages are barriers which can be penetrated – it is perfectly possible, and desirable, to learn foreign languages. But



■ A wayside cross in Moldova, where language could be a problem.

Picture: SUBMITTED

the separation of the world's population into groups speaking different languages does have the very beneficial consequence of helping to promote the growth of cultural diversity. And diversity can lead to the development of alternative possibilities for humankind for making social, political and technological progress: we are not all heading up the same, possibly blind, alley.

A world where everyone spoke the same language would be a less interesting place. But there is also a good chance that it would be a rather stagnant place too. If the entire population of the world consisted of native speakers of English, then we would probably not only all be watching

American soap operas on TV and drinking Coca Cola, we would also all tend to have the same values, the same ideas, and the same world-view. If diversity does lead to progress, then this would be a disturbing scenario.

It is already clear that English-speaking countries such as Britain and Australia are more vulnerable than many others to the infiltration of influence, not all of it beneficial, from American advertising, ideas and values.

I don't know the answers to the following questions – but have high school-leavers in Moldova actually started organising proms yet? Do children in Kazakhstan go trick-or-treating at Halloween?